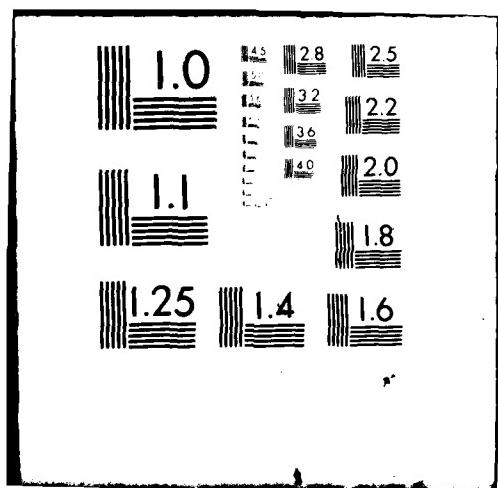


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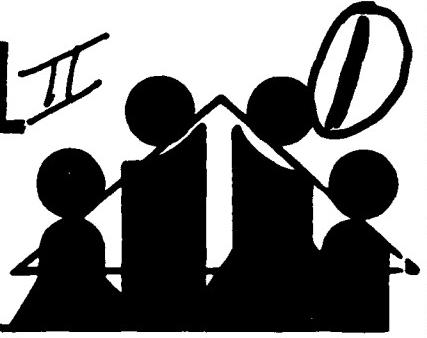


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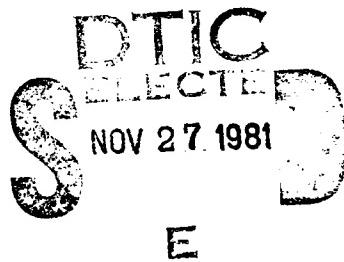
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**FAMILY ROLES IN TRANSITION
IN A CHANGING MILITARY**

**EDNA J. HUNTER
MELISSA A. POPE**



**REPORT No. TR-USIU-81-02
1981**

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FAMILY ROLES IN TRANSITION

In a Changing Military*

EDNA J. HUNTER

MELISSA A. POPE

USIU-TR-81-02

1981

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* Dr. Edna J. Hunter is currently Director, Family Research Center, United States International University, San Diego CA 92131; Melissa A. Pope serves as Research Assistant at the Center. This project was funded jointly by the United States Air Force Office of Scientific Research under MIRP 79-0042, dtd. 4-18-79, and the Organizational Effectiveness Research Program, Office of Naval Research (Code 452), Department of the Navy, under Work Order Request Number N00014-79-C-0519, NR 179-888. None of the opinions and assertions contained herein are to be construed as official or as reflecting the views of the Department of the Navy or the Department of the Air Force.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the Vietnam War, the United States Army was made up of primarily single men. Between 1952 and 1972, the percentage of married Army enlisted men increased from 29.7 percent to 52.6 percent. More than half of this increase occurred since 1969. Comparable changes took place within the other service branches. By 1973, 84.7 percent of the Army's officers were married, and 56.5 percent of all men in the Army were married (Segal, Segal, Holz, Norbo, Seeberg, & Wubbena, 1976). As of September, 1976, 56 percent of all personnel in all service branches were married, and dependents out-numbered military personnel 1.5 to 1 (Carr, Orthner, & Brown, 1980).

Research has shown that the percentage of married personnel increases with grade or rank, and with age. Also, as the percentage of marriages increases, the average size of the family decreases (Segal, et al., 1976). The Army is younger than any other employed labor force. In 1976 the median age of the wives was 23 years, versus 40 years of age in the civilian sector, and more than 75 percent of all military wives were under 30 years old. As for active duty military dependent children, 47 percent were under five years old, and almost 75 percent were under ten years of age (Segal, et al., 1976).

In most marriages in the military, it is the military man who is married to a civilian woman (Carr, Orthner, & Brown, 1980). Of those marriages, 70 percent have children. In 1978, among Air Force personnel, slightly less than one percent of the marriages were between a military wife and a civilian husband, and of that small segment, 34.6 percent were women officers and 22.9 percent were women enlisted personnel.

Of the marriages between a military wife and a civilian husband, 80.8 percent of the female married officers were childless; 73.4 percent of the enlisted female marrieds were childless. These women apparently choose not to have children because of the threat of separation due to their jobs and the need for career independ-

ence. Within the Air Force there were over 5,400 single parents in 1978 (Carr, Orthner & Brown, 1980).

Typically within the civilian community, when a couple is separated due to a career, a child goes with the mother. During a separation period of a military-military couple, the child is just as likely to stay with the father as with the mother. In the United States generally, nine out of ten single parents are women. Within the Air Force, on the other hand, research has shown that three out of four single parents are men (Carr, Orthner, & Brown, 1980; Orthner, 1980). With the changing family roles in society at large which have been occurring with the increasing numbers of women in the workworld, these statistics on the roles and structure of the military family are expected to change over time, along with changing policies which affect families.

Is There a "Typical" Military Wife?

The military has been viewed as a self-contained community which brings its residents benefits, but also isolation and alienation. Substantial past research has been devoted to the "typical" or "traditional" military wife and the roles she fills. Much of the data from these studies and many of the conclusions based on them are outmoded because of the rapid changes taking place in society generally. However, the military family appears to change more slowly, and tradition within the military subculture is particularly slow to dissolve.

Typically the military wife, unlike the civilian wife, shares her husband's occupation while concurrently maintaining her familial and personal responsibilities. Due to transfers and transitions, the family is the primary social unit an officer associates with consistently throughout his entire career.

It has been found that support from the family, particularly that from the wife, is one of the most important factors influencing an officer's performance on the job (Stoddard & Cabanillas, 1976).

Moreover, the wife plays a key role in the husband's decision to remain in the service or leave it. Family-related problems also tend to have a negative impact on job satisfaction (Segal, 1977; Derr, 1979). The serviceman is obviously strongly influenced by his personal life, especially his relationship with his wife. Her adaptation and happiness within the military system are not only important because she is a human being, but also because she is part of the military intrinsic to the "combat readiness" of the military force, and instrumental in the mental health of the service person.

The Role of Military Wife

There have been a number of research efforts which have explored and attempted to identify the wife's changes, perceptions, acclimations and attitudes of the roles she portrays as part of the military lifestyle and system. In 1976, Stoddard and Cabanillas described three general types of wife roles: the housewife, the companion, and the complementary role.

The "housewife" is one role whereby, by choice or lack of interest, the wife is totally isolated from her husband's work. In the "companion" wife role, her behaviors and actions are modified and controlled not by any spousal agreement, but are instead dictated by her husband's employer and her husband's occupational needs. As a "companion" wife, she tends to perform her duties mechanically. The third type wife role, the "complementary" role, is that of a woman fully participating in the duties and activities surrounding her husband's formal occupation, and acting as an integral part of her husband's vocation. She is necessary to his work-related routine and, as a partner, complements his career success (Stoddard & Cabanillas, 1976).

The role of a military wife can become dysfunctional if she chooses either of the traditionally prescribed roles of "housewife" or "companion." The military typically appears to perceive the wife

who enters its institution in the role of "housewife" as being apathetic. In that role she makes the family her top priority, and is seen as rejecting her military-connected duties. As the "companion," she may not have the chance to build self esteem through personal achievement, since the element of mobility in the military does not allow her to transfer her own credentials of status and attainment effectively into her own life.

Military wives tend to adapt less to traditional civilian wife models because, as military wives, they have more responsibilities and require more initiative than their civilian counterparts. They deal with both their husband's military career plus the social roles expected of them, and, as a result, are likely to contend with much role strain. The military wife may especially experience role conflict at the time she decides where her priorities lie, if they are different from the military's expectations of what they should be (Stoddard, 1978).

Traditionally, a woman's status and social class follow that of her husband's, regardless of what other roles she may play. Some writers suggest that perhaps women choose, even unconsciously, not to develop either their potential or individuality, but rather to live through and for others (Reinerth, 1976). Within the military, women married to officers often have a wife/mother conflict. This role conflict takes the form of role stress, resulting from the many social roles to be carried out by one person. The selection of one role automatically excludes the possibility of fulfilling the expectations and requirements of another role.

It appears that the military wife is involved with her husband's career as a firm priority, above personal and family interest much more so than a civilian wife. For example, when a new officer's wife arrives at a new duty station, she is sometimes, implicitly or explicitly, told by the senior officer's wife: (1) to uphold the military traditions; (2) to complement her husband, "the officer;" (3) that military considerations are held above personal considerations of interest, including friends and the civ-

ilian sector; and (4) that it is strongly suggested that she be involved with other officers' wives and the military organizations (Stoddard & Cabanillas, 1976).

Although only one spouse is employed by the military institution, it is apparent that the institution places demands on both marital partners. When the wife is basically husband-oriented and dependent upon his job economically, this situation makes for a special combination of roles which could be classified as the "two person - one career couple (Reinerth, 1976). The wife is unpaid and unseen labor.

There may exist an explicit ideology of educational equality between the sexes, but this assumed equality conflicts with an implicit inequality of access to occupations. The educated woman tends to shift her aspirations into noncompetitive channels, trying to preserve the rewards of occupational success. She is pressed into vicarious achievement. Unfortunately, the ambivalence she experiences is destructive to a woman's self esteem. She participates in activities which she may personally reject, but nonetheless performs. A married woman's greatest pressures occur in situations where her husband's employing institution operates within a social enclave, such as the military institution (Reinerth, 1976).

When the military husband reenlists, he demonstrates in this way his commitment to the military and the military to him. The wife is rewarded at that point by also being a member of the military community. She is an extension of her husband and is even ascribed the title and role of "dependent." Thereupon, to some extent she relinquishes her autonomy and identity within the civilian society (Dobrofsky, 1977). She is instructed in rules of conduct, etiquette, and protocol. Her activities of socializing and socialization are directly linked to her husband's rank. She may even be made to feel responsible for her husband's promotions, or failure to make promotions. The military wife's proscribed responsibilities, typically volunteer work, increase with her husband's rank. The military wife has been expected to put her husband's

and the military's needs before her own. Ironically, the military system requires an independent, self-sustaining "liberated" woman in order to accomplish its mission most efficiently. Wives maintain the family, create a social network among their own families to support themselves, and are given authority (according to their husband's ranks) to meet the demands of military life (McCubbin, 1977; Nice, 1978).

Mobility and Changing Roles

The active duty military service person is always on call, and at any time may be given unexpected orders to transfer. Relocating to a new base is a shared stress and responsibility for husband and wife (Stoddard & Cabanillas, 1976). Mobility causes the military family to face restless transiency which often results in fragmented and superficial relationships with friends (Frances & Gale, 1973; Lindquist, 1952). Military families are required to find a different social position in each new subculture they move to, and they do so with fewer guidelines than civilian families (Bellino, 1970). Mobility also affects family roles, and is particularly stressful for wives who are somewhat alienated from others and do not identify with the military (Stanton, 1976). This is particularly true where the family lives off-base.

Interpersonal and social problems often result for the military family, since it has no lasting ties with any civilian community due to mobility. In moving, the only longstanding relationships that a wife takes with her are usually those of her nuclear family, and the most central relationship is that of her husband (Reinerth, 1976). Her husband and his career are the sole reasons for her move in the first place. If, after relocation, trouble arises between herself and her husband, the wife is more alone than ever. The military wife's principal "disease" is loneliness.

Research has shown that typically women tend to feel that the mobility of the military lifestyle harms marriage, while most men seem to believe that their wives will support them by following them wherever assigned. Thus, it is not unexpected that more

active duty women in both the enlisted and officer ranks are single, when compared with their male counterparts (Carr, Orthner & Brown, 1978).

Separation and Family Roles

There is a hierarchy of authority within the military system, and although the wife is very much a member of this structure and to some extent holds her husband's rank, she is nonetheless placed in a "dependent" position. Ironically, when the family is separated, she must immediately take over the reins of the family and is forced into an unfamiliar and independent role (Bruce, 1980). Through necessity, wives take on the stereotypic masculine role while their husbands are gone. They must venture into the outside world and into the masculine realm if they are to maintain the household. Marital problems may be caused by separations because of the inevitable changes in marital roles which occur both from the opportunity and the necessity to develop independence during the husband's absence. Separations present a new concept of the wife's role, and she develops an unwillingness to shift back to passivity and dependency after the husband's return (Hunter, 1977b; Snyder, 1978).

The Naval officer, in particular, is routinely absent for extended periods of time. Repeated separations lead to family adjustments and stresses that are disruptive to marital and family relationships, and if severe enough, may in turn affect the husband's performance of his military duties (Reinerth, 1976). The wife is expected to maintain the family unit until the father returns but she is also expected to repress any ambitions which might negatively affect her husband's career. Over time she becomes more and more capable, and she also grows more and more independent (Snyder, 1978).

Actually, the most functional form of adjustment to husband/father absence seems to be a more female-centered or matriarchal family where the mother takes on instrumental family tasks, without discarding her expressive tasks. The military wife frequently

identifies with her husband's rank and status, and this alone may provide enough gratification to overcome the difficulties that occur during separations. The degree of stress experienced by the wife is dependent on adaptability, integration, and previous exposure to family separation. As the length of servicetime increases, research has shown that female-centeredness increases regardless of the number of separations. This increase in matriarchal family structure is even greater for childless women than for women with children, regardless of the number of children (Reinerth, 1976). In terms of the sex of child, it has been found that families whose eldest child is male are more likely to be female-centered than those whose eldest child is female. Also, middle-rank families are more likely to be affected by role reorganization than other families. For all families, the first separation appears to have the greatest effect on role change, especially if it is an extended combat separation (Reinerth, 1976).

In a prolonged, ambiguous family disruption, such as families of missing in action servicemen (MIAs) experienced during the Vietnam conflict, there is a need for the family to change and/or reorganize in order for the structure to remain viable (Boss, 1975; 1977; 1980; Boss, Hunter & Lester, 1978; Hunter, 1980; Nice, 1978). In such an absence, the family needs to become a one-parent system in order to cope and to function with the severe stresses. In that way, the family uses its own strength to heal. Research has shown that where MIA wives maintained the husbands' roles (that is, there was "high psychological father presence"), the wives were more likely to be exclusively homemakers (Boss, 1980; Boss, Hunter & Lester, 1978). These families also were more likely to be highly dysfunctional.

Family Health in Relation to Family Separation

Family separation has been viewed as a crisis which leads to physical illness in family members (Bruce, 1980; Hunter, 1980; Isay, 1968; Nice, 1979; Pearlman, 1970; Snyder, 1978). Wives become

depressed while their husbands are gone, are ill more frequently, and tend to grieve over the separation. The military wife adjusting to separation is analogous to the wife grieving over the death of a spouse. As with the grief process, the wife can learn to cope with hardships and difficulties that occur due to separation (Bermudes, 1973; 1977; Stratton, 1978). The stages the wife goes through in adjusting to separation have been delineated as:

- Shock: During the weeks prior to deployment the wife withdraws from her husband.
- Emotional Release: The wife has arguments with her spouse and loses patience with her children.
- Withdrawal: The husband leaves, and the wife withdraws.
- Anger: The wife loses her temper easily, gets angry at the military system, and feels resentment towards that system.
- Depression: The wife becomes depressed, cries, and sleeps more than usual (Bermudes, 1977).

During separation, the wife becomes a father surrogate to her children. As a "good" military wife, she is supportive, knowledgable, and she maintains her busy activities that enhance her husband's career. The wife has expectations placed on her to cope well, to be self-sufficient, and not to be in need of outside help while her husband is gone (Snyder, 1978).

Wives eventually may feel abandoned and frustrated, with no outlet or target for their feelings (Bruce, 1980). During separation, many wives and families move off base; some move back to their parent's homes and relinquish their ties with the military (Bruce, 1980; Duncan, 1969). Thus, the wife may become dependent again on her own nuclear family during this period of family disruption, or, at the other extreme, she may have extramarital affairs during her husband's absence. Either action may lead to conflict or even divorce upon the husband's return (Duncan, 1969).

Should the military wife discover that she needs emotional or psychological support during separation, studies show that typi-

cally she copes with the stress by first going to close friends, neighbors, or relatives. Next, she and/or the family may go to their personal chaplain. After they have tapped those resources, as a last resort they will go to the military community, that is, the resources available through the military organization. Rarely, however, do wives actually utilize the military's formal resources (Bruce, 1980; Duncan, 1969).

Because of frequent deployments, a full fifteen to twenty percent of military fathers are not living with their families at any one point in time. Parental absence is among the greatest of the problems which the military family experiences (Duncan, 1976). The mother is the parent who receives the greatest impact from the deployment, and she perceives that she has a more difficult role during the separation than that of her spouse (Baker, Cove, Fagen, Fischer, & Janda, 1968). According to research findings, mothers report their foremost problem during separation is their children's behavior (i.e., grades in school going down, crying often, complaining more, poor health). Ordinarily, at least in the civilian community, the extended family can assist during times of family disruption; that help may not be available to the military wife, however.

Role Changes Again After Reunion

At the time of reunion, the military wife may be excited and happy, but she is also often tense and fearful, not only about changes which may have occurred in her husband, but also about his reactions to the changes which have taken place in her and the children (Bey & Lange, 1974; Hunter, 1977b). Some readjustments are always necessary at the time of reunion because of these changes in each spouse which have occurred. There may be fears of infidelity, or the wife or husband may be perceived as having become too bossy, too assertive, too cold. In terms of role change upon reunion, most husbands do not anticipate that their roles will

have changed; however, the wives usually see themselves as more important within the family system than previously (Baker, Cove, Fagen, Fischer & Janda, 1968; Hunter, 1977b). They also assume they should have more of a voice in major family decisions. Most spousal differences following reunion involve disagreements over homemaker tasks, discipline of the children, and the degree of each partner's independence (Bey & Lange, 1974; Wester, Hunter & Palermo, 1977). Marital conflicts are more likely to arise where there is a lack of open communication, resulting in failure to work out the new relationship rules and roles (Webster, Hunter & Palermo, 1977). Needless-to-say, roles which shifted during the separation period must be reshuffled after the return. Understandably, the longer a couple is separated, the larger their differences concerning family role allocation, and the more difficult it is for them to reintegrate.

The husband often feels unneeded and unimportant, and the wife finds it difficult to relinquish her complete control of the family. If father criticizes the behavior of a child, the wife tends to react defensively. Criticism is interpreted as criticism of methods of discipline during the separation period. However, eventually, through the processes of communication, confrontation, negotiation and compromise, the marriage partners grow close and cohesive as a family unit once again. Better readjustment occurs when the wife perceives that she has grown as a person, and when she actually expects a change in spousal roles upon reunion (Baker, et al., 1968; Webster, Hunter & Palermo, 1975).

Because former Vietnam prisoners of war had been in captivity for many years (the average absence was five years), the process of marital adjustment and reintegration was highly exaggerated compared with that required following routine military separation. In many instances, wide gaps grew during the separation, and many marriages (approximately 30 percent) did not survive the first year post-return. Each partner had developed different coping strategies for survival, and differing lifestyles resulted from their

individual maintenance techniques. During captivity, the men lost all independence and were totally dependent upon their captors. Concurrently, the wives grew and matured, became self-reliant, independent, with high self-confidence. At the time of reunion the wives actually controlled the reintegration process (McCubbin, Hunter & Dahl, 1976). Some women actually resented the husbands' return, but on the other hand, the wives' personal growth was unanticipated by the husbands and this factor also upset the balance of many marriages (Worthington, 1977). A returned POW often felt left out, unimportant and unneeded upon his return, since his roles within the family had frequently all been filled by others.

Death and Changing Family Roles

Research stemming from the Israeli Yom Kippur War focused on the effects on the family of the death of the father, especially the effects on the children (Lifshitz, 1975a; 1975b; Sanua, 1974; 1975; Smilansky, 1975; Teichman, 1975; Teichman, Speigel, & Teichman, 1975). These studies seemed to indicate that the more traditional the ideology of the mother and the more controlled and clearly defined was her role, the fewer problems exhibited by the child's behavior. Sons appeared more affected than daughters, possibly because sons were expected to assume the father's role, and yet were not really ready or able to assume it. This situation tended to result in feelings of disorganization in the boy. Children who were given the opportunity to express their anguish and disintegration, adjusted and integrated the loss within their personal systems and appeared to readjust quickly to life.

The Israeli studies pointed out that the ability to adjust to loss is dependent on the person's previous level of adjustment, the concrete-affection ties present with the family, the person's social system of cooperation and shared responsibilities, and the introduction of outside professional help to guide the mother and the children's teachers on how to interact more effectively

with the child (Lifsthitz, 1975a). Several Israeli studies specifically addressed the use of paraprofessionals in helping the family adjust to the changes in family structure resulting from the death of a family member (Sanua, 1975; Teichman, 1975; Teichman, Spiegel & Teichman, 1975).

Military Women in the Workworld

Research has shown that the proportion of working military wives decreases with the increasing rank/grade of the husband, for both officers and enlisted families. The motivation for these wives to work varies. That is, junior enlisted wives often work to meet basic living expenses, while the more senior enlisted wives work to improve their standard of living. However, officers' wives work more for strictly personal reasons, with money or financial motivations not necessarily involved in their decisions to be part of the work force (Segal, et al., 1976).

Some research has been done on military wives' attitudes towards women's struggle for equality. An examination of military wives' awareness of the feminist movement showed that in 1977 those women who felt most informed about the women's movement, believed that it held the least significance for them. Wives of lower ranking personnel, who were also younger wives, were less informed, and yet felt the women's movement held the most personal significance for them (Dobrofsky & Batterson, 1977). Overall, officer's wives were the most feminist-oriented. Socioeconomically and educationally, they parallel the civilian feminists (Bruce, 1980).

Overall, however, military wives have actually demonstrated minimal involvement with the women's movement. Nonetheless, the majority of women believe that the military should officially recognize the wife's career and her professional needs when making transfers and/or assignments. Dobrofsky and Batterson (1977) also found that those women who viewed the military as a constraint to their involvement in the workworld also felt that the military perceived

wives in general as a "problem." However, women who believed that the military viewed the wife as a contributor and as a unique individual, did not appear to experience personal constraints. It has become increasingly apparent that many officers' wives, especially, are no longer satisfied with the traditional role proscribed for them by the system in which they find themselves (Bruce, 1980). Research has further shown that it is the wives with higher levels of education, less than three children, and who are married to officers that hold the more contemporary views (Thomas & Durning, 1980). Also, it is the older, unemployed women who hold the more traditional orientations towards women's roles.

Satisfactions in the Military Wife Role

Contrary to Dobrofsky and Batterson's views, other investigators contend that, on the whole, most wives of military personnel appear to like the military lifestyle and actually enjoy the social interactions which others might see as mere obligations or acts of duty (Thomas & Durning, 1980). In a 1978 survey of Navy wives, Schaefer concluded that most Navy wives feel successful, proud, and worthy as persons. They associate these positive feelings with being a part of the Navy system and feel a sense of belonging to that system. Most wives also believe that they have some degree of influence on their husbands' decisions about the military career choice and can exert that influence if they so chose. It was Schaefer's conclusion that current Navy policy was doing a good job at socializing the Navy wife into the Navy system. Nonetheless, it has also been suggested that some officer's wives, although they accept their responsibilities and duties, do so only because their officer husbands are not really career-minded, and because both spouses view the military, not as a permanent way of life, but as merely an interruption in it (Reinerth, 1976).

Conclusions and Implications for Research

It is evident that there are many new questions that beg answers. Will these changes in family roles continue? What sort of changes in military policies and programs are required to attenuate or eliminate some of the problems now being experienced by both the family and the military organization? Will joint spouse transfers promote marital stability and reduce attrition? Will 24-hour day childcare solve a major problem for single-parent military families? Will support services for families fill the gap left by the exodus of willing volunteers who now insist on working for pay and professional gratifications?

Most of the prior research on changing roles within the family flows from the studies of military separations, specifically wartime separations, a few studies from the Israeli wartime experiences, and more recent studies of the changing roles of women due to the feminist movement. These studies, for the most part, have been fragmented and little effort has been made to fit the findings into a wider theoretical framework, such as role theory, family development cycle theory, crisis theory, or communication theory. Until additional well-planned comprehensive studies are carried through, there will be no strong base for planning and implementing preventive or proactive programs which are efficacious in alleviating and preventing many of the stresses which family systems experience when roles and tasks within the family are required to shift suddenly and drastically as they often do for the military family.

This review of the literature on military family roles makes it obvious that in order to cope effectively with the lifestyle, one attribute necessary for the military spouse is role flexibility. It is also apparent that the concept of the "traditional military wife" has changed, especially beginning in the early 1970s, with the increasing number of women in the All Volunteer Force, the push for equality for women in the workplace, and the in-

flationary trends which have made the two-paycheck family a necessity for many couples. As women have taken on larger roles in the workworld, men have simultaneously taken on more active family roles. In both instances these changes impact not only the military family members, but also military policies, programs, retention statistics, and ultimately the accomplishment of the military mission.

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outlined proper roles for the ~~traditional~~ military family members, more recent articles focus on changing roles for both men and women in society which are belatedly being reflected within the military, and thus creating new problems for mission accomplishment. Ironically, as the research points out, the military requires independent ~~dependents~~ if the family is to cope successfully with frequent family separations. The major focus of existing research has been problem-oriented and has dealt with the unique stresses placed upon militaryfamily members, which require flexibility of family roles.

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